

**RELIGIOUS ORGANIZATIONS OPPOSE BOEHNER AMENDMENT TO STRIP
CIVIL RIGHTS PROTECTIONS FROM HEAD START AND URGE “NO” VOTE
ON FINAL PASSAGE IF AMENDMENT PREVAILS**

September 19, 2005

Dear Representative:

We, the undersigned religious and religiously affiliated organizations, write to urge you to oppose the planned Boehner religious discrimination amendment to the School Readiness Act (H.R. 2123), the bill reauthorizing the Head Start program. The bill approved 48-0 by the House Committee on Education and the Workforce that reaches the House floor is the product of many months of hard work resulting in a strong bipartisan agreement. It maintains critical civil rights protections in Head Start, preventing religious discrimination in federally funded Head Start positions. Any attempts to amend the bill and repeal these protections threaten not only the bipartisan spirit of the bill, but the integrity of the Head Start program itself. **If the promised Boehner amendment passes, we urge you to vote “NO” to H.R. 2123.** We are disappointed that an otherwise acceptable bill could be jeopardized with such an unwise amendment.

We represent a diverse array of religions, covering the political and ideological spectrum. We stand united to oppose this unwarranted attack on a vital civil rights provision that protects over 1.6 million teachers and parent volunteers from having to choose between their religion and their participation in the local Head Start program.

The bipartisan bill that passed unanimously out of the Committee on Education and the Workforce has the potential to garner support from a broad range of groups, including all of the religious groups on this letter, but not if the proposed language is included. As religious institutions, we support preserving the autonomy of religious organizations with respect to hiring decisions made in privately funded programs. However, we also recognize the importance of ensuring that taxpayer dollars do not fund positions connected with the operation of the program itself where candidates may be disqualified because of the religion they practice. The longstanding nondiscrimination provision included in Head Start legislation since 1972 strikes the appropriate balance between religious autonomy and nondiscrimination. For over three decades, religious organizations have enthusiastically and effectively participated in the program while upholding constitutional and civil rights standards. We are not aware of any call by these religious based Head Start programs for congressional authority to begin to discriminate on the basis of religion in this government-funded program.

As religious and religiously affiliated organizations, we strive to make the world a better place for the next generation and generations to follow. The Head Start program is an extremely successful government funded means of achieving this goal, providing opportunities for nearly one million at-risk children each year. We urge you to oppose any effort, such as Rep. Boehner’s planned floor amendment, to change this crucial program by stripping its civil rights protections and allowing providers to discriminate on religious grounds.

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter.

Respectfully,

African American Ministers in Action
Alliance of Baptists

American Baptist Churches, USA
American Jewish Committee
American Jewish Committee, New Jersey Chapter
American Jewish Committee, Cincinnati Chapter
American Jewish Committee, Metropolitan Detroit Chapter
American Jewish Committee, Milwaukee Chapter
American Jewish Congress
Anti-Defamation League
Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty
Central Conference of American Rabbis
Christian Justice Action, United Church of Christ
Church Women United
Disciples of Justice Action Network (Disciples of Christ)
Equal Partners in Faith
Faith Action Network of People For the American Way
Na'Amat USA
National Council of Jewish Women
Progressive National Baptist Convention
The General Board of Church and Society of The United Methodist Church
The Interfaith Alliance
The Interfaith Alliance of Middle Tennessee
The Interfaith Alliance of Southeast Pennsylvania
The Interfaith Alliance of Georgia
The Interfaith Alliance of Greater Cincinnati
Texas Faith Network
Sikh American Legal Defense and Education Fund (SALDEF)
Union for Reform Judaism
Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations
Women of Reform Judaism